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Abstract. This article contains a commentary on a new public policy announced by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan that will proscribe televisions, videocassette recorders, videotapes, and satellite dishes among the people under its control. The commentary focuses on the potential political consequences of this policy based on psychological research on the effects of television.

According to The New York Times (July 9, 1998), the Islamic Taliban movement--specifically its Minister for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue--has decreed that people under its control have 15 days to get rid of their television sets. (In addition, videocassette recorders, videotapes, and satellite dishes will be proscribed.) After the 15 days, television sets will be "smashed" by the religious police.

The rationale for the proscription seems to be that the governmental authorities believe that television and related media are the source of corruption. Allegedly, the media induce (1) behavior violating Taliban interpretations of the Koran and conceptions of government by Islamic precepts, Sharia, and (2) beliefs, opinions, emotions, and attitudes that not only generate behavioral violations but are themselves violations.

More jaundiced observers and analysts of the Taliban policy might posit that what's really at Issue is not religious purity but government control--the former merely a vehicle to the latter. If this were the case, the Taliban policy immediately could be analyzed in the context of political control strategies comprising communication media--e.g., the media warfare of the Cold War waged successfully by the United States and its allies, less successfully by the Soviet Union and its allies; more recently, China's banning of satellite dishes and even various international attempts to ban the Internet. In the latter cases, instead of merely censoring, modifying, or outright jamming of incoming information, government leaders seeks to ban the very communication medium from which information is imparted.

Back to the Taliban: do such constraining policies make sense? In other words--irrespective of ethical, moral, and even legal Issues--can information from such media sources predictively influence people in a manner deleterious to political control or even to internalization of or compliance or identification with religious precept?

Research on the psychological effects of television only indirectly address these questions. (As anatomy is not destiny, neither is psychology politics.) Sticking with research on real or simulated commercial television shows, one can safely stipulate that televised information can induce various psychological consequences--e.g., inducing (1) antisocial behavior, including violent behavior, in some people in some situations (Palermo, 1995); (2) exacerbation of personal anxieties in some people (Johnston & Graham, 1997); (3) incidental learning of words in some people (Chen & Peng, 1995); and (4) decreased interest in hobbies, reading books, and schoolwork of still other people (Myrtek et al, 1996).

The crucial problem from a government control perspective is that each of the above psychological effects can in turn support or detract from political control. So-called antisocial and violent behaviors can be employed against a government's supporters and adversaries alike. Personal anxieties can lead to

political destabilization or render destabilization less likely through the preoccupations of everyday life. Learning also can increase or weaken support for an existing government depending on what is learned.

One finding, however, seems to merit the very close attention of government leaders. At least with violent behavior, putting warning labels on allegedly problematic television content increases viewers' interest in said content (cf. Bushman & Stack, 1996). Although not yet adequately studied, a reasonable generalization might be that what is proscribed becomes more attractive--including the viewing medium itself. And a potential moral from such a generalization? The more becomes proscribed, the more difficult to implement proscription, the more tenuous the word of proscription (law) becomes, and the less strong the government making up and backing up the law. So, will the Taliban's proscriptions smash television or itself? (See Bushman, B.J., & Stack, A.D. (1996). Forbidden fruit versus tainted fruit: Effects of warning labels on attraction to television violence. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 2, 207-226; Chen, H., & Peng, D. (1995). Do young children learn words from TV? A study of incidental learning. Psychological Science, 18, 22-28; Crossette, B. (July 10, 1998). Afghan rulers planning to smash TV sets. The New York Times, p. A7; Johnston, W.M., & Davey, G.C.L. (1997). The psychological impact of negative TV news bulletins: The catastrophizing of personal worries. British Journal of Psychology, 88, 85-91; Myrtek, M., Scharff, C., Bruegner, G., & Mueller, W. (1996). Physiological, behavioral, and psychological effects associated with television viewing in schoolboys: An exploratory study. Journal of Early Adolescence, 16, 301-323; Palermo, G.B. (1995). Adolescent criminal behavior: Is TV violence one of the culprits. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 39, 11-22.) (Keywords: Information Warfare, Mass Media, Perception Management, Propaganda.)